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ABSTRACT

Recent research and policy documents on indigenous Australians' development needs and aspirations were reviewed to determine their impact on current developments in vocational education and training (VET) research and policy. Special attention was paid to the work of indigenous community-controlled organizations in areas such the following: land; health; housing; employment; economic development; community development; cultural maintenance and revival; law and justice; and local, community, and regional self-government and self-determination. Among the review's main conclusions were the following: (1) current policy settings and research on the educational needs of indigenous Australians have been overly influenced by human capital theory and economic rationalist policy; (2) an alternative approach to VET research and provision for indigenous communities and development of alternative pathways to indigenous development are needed; (3) Aboriginal poverty is due not to people's deficits in "human capital" but rather to the lack of public or private sector support for alternative indigenous forms of economic and social organization; and (4) national VET policies and research should be refocused to reflect the special role that independent Aboriginal community-controlled organizations play in facilitating Aboriginal peoples' social and economic objectives. (The report contains 53 references. Appended is a brief discussion of the project participants and methodology.) (MN)

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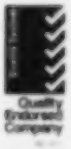

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AEDP	Aboriginal Employment Development Policy
AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
AEP	Aboriginal Education Policy
AGPS	Australian Government Printing Service
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
ANU	Australian National University
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSIPTAC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CDEP	Community Development Employment Project
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CRES	Centre for Resource and Environment Studies
DEETYA	Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
FIAEP	Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers
ITAB	Industry training advisory body
LGA	Local government area
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs
NAEC	National Aboriginal Education Committee

NAHS	National Aboriginal Health Strategy
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NATSIEP	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
NATSIS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey
NCDS	National Centre for Development Studies
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NIWG	National Indigenous Working Group
NTRA	National training reform agenda
RCIADIC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
SLA	Statistical local area
VET	Vocational education and training
VOCED	Vocational education database

Executive summary

THIS PAPER REPORTS on a research project which set out to analyse recent research and policy documents on indigenous peoples' *development needs and aspirations*, a term used to encompass the full range of issues and programs sometimes also called 'Indigenous Affairs'. The research aimed to assess the extent to which current developments in vocational education and training (VET) research and policy were sufficiently informed by this separate but related body of literature. A particular focus was the work of indigenous community-controlled organisations, and the research methodology involved close collaboration with the directors of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP).

The paper argues that current policy settings and research on the educational needs of indigenous Australians have been overly influenced by human capital theory and economic rationalist policy. An historical analysis of the causes of indigenous unemployment and underdevelopment suggests the need for an alternative approach to VET research and provision for indigenous communities and the development of alternative pathways. Aboriginal poverty, the paper finds, is due not to peoples' deficits in so-called 'human capital', but to the lack of public or private sector support for alternative indigenous forms of economic and social organisation. Education and training programs should therefore be provided to communities to enable those of their members who wish to do so to raise their living standards in line with their own communities' development aspirations, rather than always expecting people to move off their own country into 'mainstream' urban-based private and public labour markets. The paper concludes that independent Aboriginal community-controlled organisations play a special role in facilitating Aboriginal peoples' social and economic development objectives, and that there is a need for national VET policies and research to be refocussed on providing greater support to these organisations, rather than pursuing more narrowly-defined notions of access and equity.

Context

THIS REVIEW REPORTS on a small research project which examined recent research and policy documents on indigenous peoples' *development needs and aspirations*, a term used to encompass the full range of issues and programs sometimes also called 'indigenous affairs'. These include land, health, housing, employment, economic development, community development, cultural maintenance and revival, law and justice, and local, community and regional self-government and self-determination. The main question the review seeks to answer is whether current indigenous vocational education and training (VET) policy and research is adequately informed by findings from this wider body of work, especially regarding the role of independent community-controlled Aboriginal organisations.

The research involved an examination of a large selection of the policy documents, reports and articles that constitute the 'literature' of Aboriginal development, along with some key summaries of vocational education research, namely the Australian National Training Authority's (ANTA) *Stocktake of equity reports* (ANTA 1997), the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) vocational education database (VOCED), and a small number of other compilations of VET research publications. The research methodology involved close collaboration with the Aboriginal directors of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP), and is described in the appendix. This paper draws both on this work, and on two earlier FIAEP research projects (FIAEP 1997 & FIAEP forthcoming), to highlight some of the tensions, gaps and contradictions that exist between these two separate but related areas of research and policy development.

The paper begins with a brief description of the origins of current policy settings in Aboriginal education and development and the available evidence regarding their effectiveness to date. It then reviews some contemporary writing on education policy, and some research into indigenous education needs, highlighting the cross-cultural confusions inherent in applying 'human

capital' theory and economic rationalist policy perspectives to the planning of indigenous peoples' education and development. We then draw on alternative analytic approaches from the policy and research literature to develop a more historically informed analysis of the causes of indigenous unemployment and underdevelopment, ending this part of the paper with a discussion of other development models and what they imply for VET research and provision. A brief discussion follows regarding the dearth of VET research which relates directly to development models based on indigenous peoples' own community organisations and their needs and programs. The conclusion summarises our findings and suggests possible future research work which could be undertaken to elucidate further the kinds of VET strategies which flow from the alternative development model we have discussed, thus filling a significant gap in the Aboriginal VET research effort.

Current policy: Origins and effectiveness

OVER A DECADE ago, the Hawke Australian Labor Party (ALP) government established two national committees of inquiry, both chaired by Aboriginal people, to investigate the employment and educational situation of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Mick Miller, ex-chairman of the North Queensland Land Council headed up the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs (Miller 1985), while Aboriginal educator Paul Hughes chaired the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (AEP Task Force 1988). Both committees undertook extensive consultations and investigations, and produced reports calling for large-scale changes. The Miller report led to the Commonwealth's adoption in 1987 of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), which set an equity target for indigenous peoples, defined as statistical parity with non-indigenous people in employment, unemployment and labour force participation rates by the year 2000. The Hughes report led to the adoption of the National Aboriginal Education Policy in 1989 (now known as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy [NATSIEP]), which committed all Australian governments, Commonwealth, States and Territories, to the achievement of educational equity over the same period, similarly defined in terms of statistical parity with non-indigenous Australians in levels of access, participation and outcomes at all levels of the education system.

Today, the most significant of these goals of statistical equity appear no closer than they were ten years ago; in fact, they are receding further into the distance. In terms of employment, this was clear when the AEDP was reviewed in 1994 (Commonwealth of Australia 1994) and the situation has worsened since then. A study commissioned in 1997 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) found that indigenous rates of unemployment were increasing, and that it would now require the seemingly impossible target of 7000 new indigenous jobs to be created per year to achieve employment equity by the year 2006, six years after the original deadline (Taylor & Altman 1997). It is also clear that this represents the

unfolding of a long-term trend since at least 1971 towards *rising*, not falling, indigenous unemployment, a trend only temporarily offset after the initial introduction of the AEDP by increases in training and labour market programs, by some 'soaking up' of the younger unemployed into the education system, and most especially by the expansion of the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) 'work for the dole' scheme. On this last point, the most recent review of CDEP noted that the indigenous unemployment rate of 38 per cent in 1994 would have been 54 per cent if not for CDEP (Spicer 1997, p.5).

This trend towards rising unemployment levels has continued alongside and despite rising levels of Aboriginal participation in education and training. Progress towards the achievement of the NATSIEP goals was examined by the *1994 review of Aboriginal education* (Commonwealth of Australia 1995a). It found there had been significant improvement in Aboriginal participation in education. However, because over the same period there were increases in non-Aboriginal peoples' participation, the goal of *equity in outcomes* from senior secondary and post-school education was still no closer than it had been when the policy was announced. It should be clear that the above developments were interrelated, in that the economic recession and restructuring which exacerbated Aboriginal unemployment in the 1980s also led to increasing school retention rates in the population as a whole, thereby making the NATSIEP goals more difficult to achieve.

In VET, the review of Aboriginal education found that Aboriginal participation was now outstripping non-Aboriginal participation, on a per capita basis. These gross national participation rates, however, are a fairly blunt instrument for the measurement of equity. Closer analysis reveals that although Aboriginal people now participate in VET at the same or greater frequency as the non-Aboriginal population, the bulk of enrolments are in catch-up and pre-vocational programs (Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). What appears to be happening is that Aboriginal people are taking advantage of the increasing resources available through NATSIEP to go 'back to school' through TAFE and other VET providers, to try to complete the education they missed out on in their secondary years. In the vocational streams of trade and para-professional courses which are the VET systems 'core business', Aboriginal participation rates remain significantly below the average. Outcomes are also not nearly as 'equal' as participation levels might suggest. The success rate of indigenous TAFE students in 1994 was low, with only

49 per cent completing one module, compared with 70 per cent for non-indigenous students; and full-time employment of graduates was 33 per cent compared with 55 per cent. (Matijevic 1996, p.28).

Most commentators conclude from this that more resources need to be directed towards raising indigenous peoples' participation in and outcomes from the more 'mainstream' vocational programs (e.g. MCEETYA 1995). In addition, ANTA have set as outcomes for the year 2000 a shift in qualifications profile to 40 per cent of indigenous qualifications at skilled, trade and professional/para professional levels; a rise in successful completion rates from 49 per cent to 60 per cent; and the development of competencies/curriculum which are socially/culturally and linguistically inclusive (Matijevic 1996, p.31). Our review of the relevant research suggests this strategy is unlikely to make the difference needed. This conclusion comes from examining a substantial body of evidence which shows that indigenous peoples' patterns of employment and unemployment are not, as is usually argued, due simply to a lack of 'mainstream' skills or qualifications, but arise from a number of inter-related factors, including:

- the historical influences of past education and employment policies and practices
- the extreme 'underdevelopment' of most Aboriginal communities
- the lack of sufficient public (or private) support for indigenous peoples' own development aspirations connected to the land and localities where they live

The evidence for this has been detailed in countless submissions put to government inquiries by Aboriginal people and their organisations, including to the Miller Inquiry; more recently, to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC 1991); and ATSIC's recent national consultations in relation to native title issues (Commonwealth of Australia 1995b).

This 'anecdotal' evidence tallies also with the findings of a growing body of 'academic' research, such as the work of Smith, Taylor, Altman, Schwab and others at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University (ANU); of Coombs and his team of researchers on the Kimberley Impact Assessment Project done by ANU's Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES); of Young at the ANU's National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS); of Wolfe-Keddie, Crough and others at ANU's North Australian Research Unit (NARU); and of Hughes, Henry,

Blunt, Warren and others associated with Deakin and Northern Territory universities (see references for detailed listings of this work). These studies confirm the importance of many issues and themes which run through the inquiries and reports of government, including:

- the continuing importance of 'subsistence-style' economic activity, especially in non-urban areas
- the importance of community-based employment and of part- and full-time 'voluntary' work
- the existence of alternative indigenous development pathways and models, expressed through indigenous organisations
- the centrality of land and land management issues to indigenous development aspirations
- the existence of distinct regional economies and labour markets
- the value of regional development planning

Taken together, this evidence suggests the need for an alternative approach to VET research and provision in relation to Aboriginal communities, one which differs significantly from the current strategy being pursued by ANTA. In this approach, rather than defining Aboriginal non-participation in mainstream VET and labour markets as the problem, and concentrating therefore on strategies to remove the 'barriers to participation', the mainstream is defined as 'the problem', and indigenous peoples' non-participation taken as a measure of the system's lack of relevance to the development needs and aspirations of their communities. While this approach need not totally replace the current approach, it nevertheless provides a useful starting point for identifying and developing some alternative VET pathways for indigenous peoples. It also helps remind researchers and policy-makers of the cross-cultural difficulties inherent in applying non-indigenous standards to the measurement of indigenous peoples' 'disadvantage' (Smith 1994a; Rowse 1997, pp.119-123), and then designing vocational education and training strategies accordingly.

These points regarding assessments of educational 'disadvantage', and 'barriers to participation', were put most forcefully in 1990 in numerous submissions to the RCIADIC, for example, the submission from Dr H C (Nuggett) Coombs (1994). They have also been raised as theoretical and research/data collection issues in some of the literature mentioned above

(e.g. Smith 1994a). Yet the major policy paper from ANTA on access and equity argues that the lack of equity in the system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is based on the same causes as it is for all six other client groups it identified as disadvantaged. These include people with disabilities, non-English-speaking-background people, women, rural and remote people, and 'various emerging groups within the community such as people leaving institutional settings' (ANTA 1996, p.4; for a more detailed critique of this paper, see FIAEP 1997, pp.72-3).

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Human capital theory and its limitations

DIFFERENT THEORETICAL APPROACHES and public policy perspectives underlie these different ways of analysing Aboriginal VET needs. The growing interest of public policy-makers and politicians in indigenous 'educational disadvantage' in the 1980s coincided with, and was strongly influenced by, a resurgence of popularity in education policy circles for the economic-type arguments of human capital theory and the more general shift in public policy thinking towards economic rationalism (Marginson 1993, pp.45-50; 1997, pp.151-156). Economic rationalists argue that the activities of 'public', i.e. taxpayer-funded, institutions such as the education system should be assessed not so much for the 'social good' they might generate, but for their contribution to the well-being of 'the economy', as judged by 'the markets'. This way of thinking dovetails well with human capital theory, which tries to provide an economic rationale for the value of education, analysing it in terms of public and private investment:

> *Human capital theory . . . is essentially an economic model of investment based on the assumption that if governments and individuals invest resources (time, money, energy) in education, tangible returns should result (including) increased productivity, increased income.* (Schwab 1997, p.7)

However, this approach produces a very oversimplified account of disadvantage and its solutions. Indigenous peoples, it suggests, are 'disadvantaged in the labour market' relative to non-indigenous people because they lack the skills, or human capital, to make them an attractive 'investment' for the employer. This lack of skills (i.e. human capital) therefore is what prevents people getting jobs, and even when they do get them, they tend to be in sectors of the economy where 'returns' (i.e. wages) are lower. Individuals are unable, therefore, to access their 'fair share' of the nation's wealth. The solution, on this analysis, is for indigenous people to upgrade their skills, increasing their stock of human capital via vocational education and training programs. This should lead to them getting more and better paying jobs, or at least to becoming more 'job-ready.'

This theory has gained the force of 'fact', even though it is based on an untestable proposition, namely that as individuals we carry within ourselves something called 'human capital', which determines whether we get a job and, if so, how much we will be paid. The theory is also used to justify public as well as private investment in education on the basis that it will also lead to increased productivity in the economy as a whole. Finally, because the 'disadvantaged' tend to be excluded from education, the argument that this is a form of 'talent wastage' allows human capital theorists to argue that 'the national economic interest and equity goals ... intersect (Marginson 1997, p.161). ANTA's access and equity report, *Equity 2001*, illustrated this approach, arguing that equity was important because problems in achieving Australia's future prosperity were being caused by the 'under-utilisation of our human resources', as well as the high costs to governments of persisting inequalities (ANTA 1996, p.3). Compare this with the Federal of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers' (FIAEP) submission responding to the ANTA paper:

> *While recognising that VET should contribute to national prosperity, and that measures to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's access to quality VET may well have this effect in the long run, we believe that the fundamental rationale for developing a VET system which meets our peoples' needs should be the recognition of our own basic human rights, and our special rights as indigenous peoples.* (FIAEP 1996)

A similar critique is made by Teasdale and Teasdale (1996).

One problem with applying 'human capital theory' to indigenous education research and policy development is that as Schwab (1996) shows in his study of participation patterns in higher education, indigenous people's behaviour does not 'conform' to the theory's predictions. Rather than take courses, for example, which would 'maximise their future returns', many indigenous students choose to study in programs which prepare them to return to work in their own communities, to 'work with their people' as they put it, rather than preparing them for (better-paid) employment which would isolate them, not only geographically but also culturally from their kin and homelands. 'The decisions pertaining to education by indigenous peoples,' Schwab concludes, 'may have much less to do with individual calculation of private rates of return than with individual calculations of cultural costs' (p.15). If this is true, then providing more subsidies to private employers, or to VET providers, to expand their offerings to Aboriginal people across the full range of mainstream courses and qualifications is unlikely to lead to the outcomes intended, because it does not accord with peoples' aspirations and needs. On

this analysis, it is more cost-effective to target subsidies towards the courses and programs that people actually want to do, especially those which allow them to make the kinds of choices about working in and for their own communities that they and their communities appear to prefer. Sources from which information on peoples' specific aspirations which relate to vocational education and training needs can be obtained are considerable, and include the Tranby report (1994), discussed further below; the 1989 National Aboriginal Health Strategy; the RCIADIC reports; the Annual Reports of Mick Dodson, Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner; and ATSIC Regional Plans.

In attempting to explain the low rates of indigenous participation in and outcomes from western education, Schwab suggested that indigenous people do not so much lack 'human capital' as the 'right' kind of 'cultural capital', a term he borrowed from a French education theorist, Bordieu. This is another way of describing the fact that indigenous communities often have very different value systems from those of the dominant society, value systems which conflict with the expectations of mainstream education providers, universities in the case of Schwab's study but, similarly, TAFE institutes, as Macintyre et al. (1996) demonstrated. However, what counts as a 'deficit' in one setting can also count as a 'plus' in another setting, as Taylor and Liu, two of Schwab's CAEPR colleagues point out, when they write that for some kinds of work, for example in CDEPs, and in indigenous organisations and service providers, 'culturally derived skills may form an important part of human capital' (quoted Rowse 1997, p.132). This helps illustrate what an imprecise concept human capital is, and therefore how risky it is to use it as the basis of educational planning.

Other evidence which undermines 'human capital' arguments includes the fact that between 1971 and 1985, according to the Census data, Aboriginal peoples' educational status improved markedly, while their employment status over the same period declined (Tesfaghiorghis & Altman 1991, p.25); and the existence of high unemployment in rural New South Wales alongside higher than average levels of education (ABS 1995). This is not meant to imply that having education and training does not increase the likelihood of obtaining employment, because it clearly does. Hunter (1996, p.12) demonstrated by analysing NATSIS data that education 'dwarfs the influence of most demography, geography and social variables' in terms of employment. (NATSIS was the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, conducted in 1994 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], as a result of a

recommendation of the RCIADIC. Its findings are reported in a series of ABS publications.)

But education and training is only a part of the equation when it comes to a strategy to develop employment opportunities and raise living standards. Education and training programs have to be linked to local and regional development strategies and priorities and these, in turn, require support from major players in the economy including both government and private sector. There is strong historical evidence to suggest that when development strategies decided at the national (and international) levels run counter to local and regional needs, and education and training strategies are determined by these, problems of unemployment and underdevelopment remain unsolved, no matter how much training people undertake.

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The importance of history

HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY glosses over the importance of history in explaining the current education and employment status of indigenous people. How did it come to be, we need to ask, that indigenous people were reduced to this status of unskilled and unwanted labour, when if one goes back only a few decades, the labour force participation rate of Aboriginal people was much higher? The proportion of Aboriginal men aged 15-64 who had jobs was 60.4 per cent at the 1971 Census, but it fell to 49 per cent in 1981 and then to 36 per cent in 1991 (Rowse 1997, p.121, quoting the work of CAEPR researchers Gregory & Daly). In some parts of Australia, in some industries, such as cattle and pearling, Aboriginal people actually formed the bulk of the workforce. Moreover, they were not 'unskilled', but highly skilled workers, despite the fact that even fewer people at that time had education levels beyond primary schooling. Their 'lack of return' on their labour in those days was due not to a lack of skill—though governments and employers did try to argue this in arbitration court hearings, arguments which the courts rejected—but because of the repressive 'native labour' regimes (Stevens 1968). Moreover, if one turns back the pages of the history books a little further, one finds that it is not that long since there were flourishing indigenous economies in many parts of Australia, in which people worked on their own lands utilising their own extraordinary skills to produce what one writer called the 'original affluent society' (Dingle 1988).

The Miller report spent considerable time demonstrating the important historical determinants of Aboriginal employment and unemployment patterns (Miller 1985, pp.27-32). Since that time, much more historical research has become available, which deserves at least some attention from VET researchers, e.g. McGrath et al. (1995). This more historical approach to understanding indigenous 'disadvantage' in the labour market suggests that it is not to be explained simply by focussing on the characteristics of the people themselves; but should rather be seen as something actively generated as a direct consequence of the pursuit by non-indigenous people of specific economic and social development strategies. In the first instance, these strategies often required people to be moved off their own land base, which was the source of their economic independence, and/or required to work for

non-indigenous employers. It was only when their labour became too expensive, as a result of struggles from the 1940s on for equal pay and against the repressive native labour laws, that they began to be considered superfluous to demand. This trend was exacerbated from the mid 1970s by a process of global economic re-organisation which produced massive changes in Australia's economy, especially a restructuring of the rural economies and industries where indigenous people had traditionally found employment.

Indigenous peoples' current labour force status has much to do with their continued resistance to these processes of colonial and 'post-colonial' development, including the unwillingness of many to give up even more of their own languages and cultures and move even further from their lands to the urban settings, to get work and an education more in keeping with the 'style' of 1990s mainstream Australian economic development. All of this was discussed in the Miller report and is cogently argued in a raft of other reports emanating from government sources over the last two decades, the most thorough of which, the RCIADIC, should be essential pre-reading for any VET provider anxious to understand what it called the 'underlying causes' of Aboriginal disadvantage. A detailed analysis of the relevance of the RCIADIC inquiry and recommendations to Aboriginal education and training provision is provided by FIAEP (1997).

Before trying to establish a better fit between indigenous peoples and the offerings of the mainstream VET system, one needs first to acknowledge that today's VET system has developed historically the way it has to better reflect the changing needs of 'industry'. But the same developments in 'industry' which the VET system has been re-designed to support helped create the rising Aboriginal unemployment in the first place. This should at least throw some doubt on the capacity of that system, as it is currently structured and managed, to contribute positive solutions to the fundamental development problems of Aboriginal communities. It greatly oversimplifies the problem to imply, as current VET policy appears to, that if people in Aboriginal communities had the same 'skills' or 'qualifications' profile as exists in non-Aboriginal society, then they would also enjoy the same rates of employment and the same rates of income. On the contrary, the VET system itself is a major institutional contributor to what Rowse (1997, p.132) calls the 'occupational and industrial mismatch between the mainstream economy's demand for labour and the characteristic skills and inclination of indigenous job seekers'.

The youth factor

A KEY ISSUE IN any historically informed analysis of contemporary indigenous unemployment is the massive decline in full-time work opportunities for teenagers, from 615 000 jobs nationally in 1966 to only 260 000 in 1995 (Marginson 1997, p.169), a decline which occurred against a backdrop of rapid increase, especially among Aboriginal people, of the numbers in this age range (15-19 year olds). The extent of the effect as reflected in the rising unemployment rate in the Aboriginal population as a whole, is particularly devastating because of the relative youthfulness of the Aboriginal population. Young people make up a much larger proportion of the total Aboriginal population than their counterparts do in the non-indigenous population, with around 50 per cent of the population at the 1996 Census being under 19. Consequently, any development which affects youth in particular (like growing youth unemployment) has a disproportionately high influence on Aboriginal communities.

This decline in full-time teenage work opportunities was a major factor leading non-Aboriginal young people to stay longer at school, but this was less of an option for Aboriginal people, for a number of reasons. These include:

- In many cases, they lived in areas where there are no schools catering to people in this age range (and there are still, today, no secondary schools in the Northern Territory, outside of the main urban centres, where only a minority of the Aboriginal population live).
- For many young Aboriginal men, it was not appropriate in terms of their cultural obligations and status to continue in an institution where they were not afforded the respect due to them.
- In many communities, both urban and rural, young Aboriginal women by this age were also expected to take on adult status and responsibilities, including having and caring for children.
- Their lack of progress through the earlier years of schooling—itself a product of the failure of schools in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s to take

any special measures to meet Aboriginal students' needs—meant they were unable to study at this higher level, where demands for written and verbal expression in standard English were much higher.

These factors help explain why the VET system has become so popular in recent years with Aboriginal people, since it gives them an opportunity to complete the education that they missed out on as a result of withdrawing from school. In VET, people can return to learning in an adult environment which is more commensurate with the status and obligations they have in their own communities.

Which development pathway? 'Top-down' vs 'bottom-up' models

THE VET SYSTEM of the 1990s is being restructured to 'maximise the contribution of educated labour to production' (Marginson 1997, p.161) in a globalised economy in which growth is led by urban-based services and technology-intensive industries. To suggest that indigenous communities will benefit if their members move into this system in numbers which reflect their proportion in the population as a whole would seem to imply that the system's range of programs, developed for the global economy of the future, also corresponds to the specific education and training needs of indigenous communities.

This point was strongly disputed by contributors to a 1994 research report to ANTA (Tranby 1994) on national curriculum priorities for indigenous VET, and its conclusions were subsequently endorsed in the *Review of Aboriginal Education* (Commonwealth of Australia 1995a, p.75). The Tranby report, based on national consultations with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including Aboriginal VET providers, as well as the Aboriginal units in the State TAFE systems, concluded that national and State ITABs would be unable to understand and deal with the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities and their organisations, and that the training profiles they produced would not reflect indigenous needs and aspirations. It therefore argued that the primary locus of decision-making regarding VET needs and provision should be the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, in their specific regions. On the VOCED database, the Tranby report is rarely cited in the published Aboriginal VET literature, perhaps because it was not publicly released by ANTA until the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC) launched it at its inaugural national conference in 1996. However, many of its ideas and findings have been replicated in subsequent research, most recently Henry and Associates (forthcoming).

The Tranby report's view was consistent with the findings of the RDIADIC, which found that 'the elimination of disadvantage requires an end of domination and an empowerment of Aboriginal people' and that Aboriginal

organisations should be supported as lead organisations in promoting development because they demonstrated the 'first pre-requisite for the empowerment of Aboriginal society, namely, the will (of the people themselves) for renewal and for self-determination' (RCIADIC 1991, vol.5, pp.15-17). The RCIADIC findings are supported by international research which points to the pre-eminent importance of indigenous organisations in successful development strategies, for example, Blunt and Warren (1996). To our knowledge, however, there has been no further research since 1994 on the key question of how better to match VET offerings to the development needs and aspirations which are expressed through indigenous community organisations.

This failure is consistent with other problems in the way the VET system has sought to absorb indigenous needs. As many commentators have noted, the 'preferred model' of VET provision promoted through the training reform agenda, for all the talk of deregulation, remains highly centralised at the national level, which is where policies, standards and performance indicators are established. A similar approach has been reflected in the way NATSIEP has been implemented, perhaps because of its closeness in time to this new economic rationalist push in education, and because the Commonwealth 'mega-department', Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), strongly influenced by economic rationalist ideology, was driving both the AEP and the national training reform agenda (NTRA) in the late 1980s (Lingard et al. 1995). One aspect of this push was a 'new managerialism' in education, a concern with methods of accountability which derived not from the tradition of democratic and parliamentary control over public institutions—of which the education system was one of the most important—but from finance and business practices, from the corporate sector. Ultimately, this is where standards, competencies and performance indicators came from, and they all owe their popularity to their suitability for a particular kind of top-down management model, one where the manager is not actually required to be present, exercising direct authority, but nevertheless maintains control through systems of reporting and information management. As Marginson points out, this kind of management very quickly rolled back the more participatory and democratic forms of education management based on involving students, staff and parents, which had enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s, and 'local democratic forms were replaced by local branches of corporate systems organisation' (Marginson 1997, p.168).

When Aboriginal people were campaigning through bodies such as the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), the Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) and the education unions for greater input to and greater control over educational decision-making *by their communities*, the push for greater consultation and democracy in the education system as a whole helped to reinforce their case. As the tide turned in the late 1980s (under a Labor government, it should be noted), the commitment in NATSIEP to greater consultation became more token, and the whole process, under the influence of the 'new managerialism', become more top-down and directive. This problem, the neglect of mechanisms for greater local and community input and control over planning and decision-making by education systems, was criticised at length in the academic literature reviewed by Bin Sallick et al. (1994) for the National Review of Aboriginal Education.

Today, the central government sets measurable targets (e.g. equity in participation levels) to which systems must adhere, with little regard to whether these will or will not meet the actual aspirations of local communities. It is assumed that they will, in phrases such as 'community development *through* skills development' (ATSIPTAC 1997; their emphasis), but the evidence is not there. Aboriginal people to some extent have accepted this model, because it at least offers them the prospect of a more sympathetic Commonwealth forcing the States to do more than they would otherwise, and much of the support comes not so much from community organisations, but from indigenous units within State TAFE systems which benefit from the increased funding and leverage they get from these Commonwealth-driven initiatives. Ultimately, the model proves inadequate, especially when States, in turn, impose their goals and performance measures on the community, and consultation becomes little more than a process of seeking community endorsement for policies and strategies already worked out further up the line. This is the very thing the RCIADIC was most critical of, and said had to be overcome if communities were really going to be empowered to solve their own problems. In relation to the AEP, the Commission concluded that:

> *A policy directed at providing more structures of consultation and decision-making does not, of itself, change the relationships of power and inequality which have so far alienated Aboriginal people from the education system. Specific attention must be paid to this relationship, and to devising appropriate and sensitive mechanisms for transforming it.* (RCIADIC 1991)

The failure of VET researchers and policy-makers to address these concerns has now led, we would argue, to an inappropriate and therefore ineffective policy focus on maximising places in mainstream courses and programs, with little evidence to suggest that even if these places are filled, the education and training will translate into sustainable employment outcomes and community development.

Land, organisation, region: The bases of development

IN THIS FINAL section, we summarise what research and other evidence tells us about indigenous peoples' economic, social, political and cultural development perspectives in a way that might help to frame and inform a more appropriate vocational education and training strategy than the simple pursuit of statistical parity. One of the most important things to emerge from the literature we reviewed is the centrality of place, of land and location, in indigenous economic and social organisation and development. It appears that VET research and policy has not yet come to terms with this, and acknowledged the high degree of regional diversity in indigenous Australia. Prior to colonisation, it should not be forgotten, the Australian continent was occupied by many hundreds of different and specific peoples, speaking their own language and dialects, with their own self-sufficient economies and forms of social organisation. These were tied intimately to specific areas of land. Though the legal doctrine of 'terra nullius' attempted to deny this reality, it nevertheless persists to the present day, albeit in a form drastically altered by the colonial experience. Professor Marcia Langton cites Williams and Johnstone for the argument that:

> *. . . many Australians may find it remarkable that Aboriginal people in what are commonly called the 'more closely settled' parts of Australia in the southern part of the continent where pastoralism became the dominant economic activity, are also living on (or near and maintaining culturally specific forms of contact with) the land of which they are the traditional owners . . . In all these areas Aboriginal people have maintained—to varying extents—elements of their subsistence economy.* (Langton 1997)

National and even State/Territory data on Aboriginal employment, education and training—the data on which policy and programs are based, because the Commonwealth and the States are the units of non-indigenous governance—obscures from view this pre-existing but continuous Aboriginal reality which is regional and local, defining itself in terms of specific locations or places. This reality comes through indirectly in research which highlights the fact that a large proportion of Aboriginal people live in 'non-urban', 'rural' or 'remote'

regions, but these categories still derive from another way of thinking about location and geography. 'Remote' for example implies remote *from*, and what is the place *from which* these other places are remote? To people who live in them, they are the centre, not the periphery. We call them 'remote' because they are remote from the urban-based centres of non-Aboriginal power and development. For Aboriginal people, it is these centres which are 'remote'; or, as Jack Beetson, FIAEP president recently argued before the Senate Inquiry into Adult Education, the Redfern 'Block' in inner Sydney is in many ways as 'remote' from the Sydney central business district, economically, culturally and socially, as the most distant outstations of the central desert.

What is important is that specific people with specific needs live in specific places, and who they are, what (broadly defined) 'work' they do and what education and training is relevant to them centres on the particular places in which they live. Aboriginal people are not spread evenly over the continent or even a particular State, with some kind of average numbers per hectare. In each place where people live, they have their own particular needs, and their own specific strategies for meeting them, which arise from the culture, history and current conditions of that place. One size, as critics of national competency standards have said, does not fit all.

This becomes obvious when research moves its focus from national and State data down to the specific regions and localities in which people actually live. An obvious example is the Torres Strait, where unemployment is at a level very different from the Queensland level, and where opportunities for education and training are quite limited. The needs of the Torres Strait are specific, and cannot be 'read off' from national or even State level participation targets. Likewise, the concentrations of Aboriginal people in places like the outer western suburbs of Sydney, or in and around Alice Springs, or in specific rural towns (but not others) have quite specific opportunities, and quite specific needs. Moreover, these areas in which Aboriginal people tend to be concentrated are often where economies are most 'underdeveloped', often because these places are small, in terms of total population within a specific radius, and do not have any significant 'industries' or 'employers'. These places are not evenly dispersed throughout the continent, and out of 877 local government areas (the ABS LGA's and SLA's [statistical local areas]), only 52 have indigenous populations greater than 1000 (1991 Census, analysed in Tesfaghiorghis 1991).

Most VET research and policy development still lumps all these different peoples from all these different, specific places, into one 'bucket', often along

with other 'disadvantaged groups' like women, people with disabilities, non-English-speaking-background people, rural people, and so on; and then tries to analyse them, and develop appropriate public policy for them, as if they were all the same 'mob.' Where things have been done with more local or regional focus, they have been done with few resources, by specific providers or organisations who have realised that they need to know more about their own people and their needs before they can devise appropriate 'training' strategies. But the overall thrust of VET research and policy development has sidestepped these issues, and consequently failed to connect with relevant research being done in other fields, for example, research into the regional planning processes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (e.g. Wolfe-Keddie 1996), Smith's studies of CDEP schemes (Smith 1994b, 1995, 1996), or the regional development studies of geographers and economists such as Crough et al. (1989).

The work of Elspeth Young (Young 1995) has highlighted another important factor. Aboriginal people who live on their own country are more likely to be unemployed, that is true. But this is not to say that they are not doing important work, by staying there, where they can 'care for country'. Moreover, evidence shows that people living on or near their own country do paid work when they can, including in CDEP schemes where they get access to one, and in their own community service organisations. They also do a large amount of unpaid 'voluntary' work in these organisations, with over a fifth of those surveyed by NATSIS involved in some way with Aboriginal organisations. Smith and Roach argue on the basis of this and other NATSIS data that:

> *it appears that volunteers could be making a major contribution to the operational capacities of indigenous organisations, and that a significant number of these people are volunteering to work while receiving only welfare payments. This preliminary conclusion offers a potentially important correction to the prejudiced notion that welfare-dependent indigenous people 'don't want to work'.* (1996, p.74)

People are also undertaking subsistence economic activities where these are available. Smith and Roach are alluding to both types of work, so-called subsistence activity, and voluntary work in organisations, when they write:

> *Indigenous involvement in mainstream employment and training is affected by culturally based attitudes and behaviours, and work activities in the informal economy and indigenous patterns of work participation are of a kind not easily accommodated in official labour force definitions.* (1966, p.65)

These researchers, along with a number of others, have shown that there is something we might call an *informal indigenous economy*, the work done in which includes hunting, fishing, gathering, gardening, house building for domestic use and artefact manufacture.

The issue of CDEP, and its place in Aboriginal development, is controversial. As a work-for-the-dole scheme targetted specifically at Aboriginal communities, it has attracted substantial criticism for its discriminatory overtones. At the same time, it is highly popular with many communities, as one of the very few options available to them to exercise control over the processes of job creation. These issues are canvassed extensively in the studies done by CAEPR, especially those by Smith (1994, 1995, 1996). It is not possible to go into these arguments here in detail, but clearly there is a need for more research into the ways that vocational education and training programs can better dovetail with CDEP schemes, to assist the development of sustainable local economic activity.

One aim of a national indigenous VET strategy should surely be wherever possible to provide indigenous people with the education and training they need in order to be able to raise their living standards *on their own lands and in their own communities*. Yet the current strategy seems more likely to accelerate the exodus of younger people from their own country and communities into the rural towns and large urban centres, since this is where most of the VET systems have concentrated their infrastructure; and from there into paid employment *off their communities*. No one has argued that people should not have this choice, if that is what they want. But it should not be the only choice. Moreover, it should not go unnoticed that by making it the only choice, the VET system is embracing a policy whose consequence, intended or not, is to *weaken* the legal rights of people to preserve their native title rights to their lands, rights which currently depend in Australian law on people being able to demonstrate continued and close association with those lands. This is borne out by evidence from NATSIS, which found that 75 per cent of people aged over 13 recognised their homelands, but only 30.4 per cent of people were actually living there. Within this, there was a strong variation, by current location; only 12.6 per cent of capital city dwellers were living on their own country, compared with 28.7 per cent of other urban people, and 48.2 per cent of rural dwellers. By the same token, 31 per cent of capital city dwellers did not recognise a homeland at all, nor did 27.8 per cent of 'other urban' people, compared with only 14.6 per cent of rural people who had 'lost' this connection (ABS 1995, table 8).

VET research and policy could benefit from paying closer attention to the features of the distinct regionally based indigenous economies, some of which have been the subject of detailed study (e.g. Crough et al. 1989; Coombs et al. 1989; Hughes 1996; Smith's CDEP studies 1994b, 1995, 1996). In most of these, there are some full-time wage and salary positions, which are concentrated almost entirely in public and community service delivery agencies and which, in remote communities in particular, tend to be held by the non-Aboriginal residents, who work as teachers, store managers, community advisors police, nurses and so on. Private sector companies move in and out on an irregular basis, to undertake infrastructure and housing development, for example, or because there are resource development projects such as mining in the region. There may be some work available for local indigenous people in these activities, as there may also be in local pastoral enterprises, but this is often seasonal and/or casual. Basically, there is not a lot of paid work available, and so if there are CDEP schemes, people work on these. People also might do some subsistence work, hunting, gathering or fishing for example, to supplement their food supply (Hughes [1996] describes one such community.) Typically, especially among older people, there is a lot of work to be done in relation to the management and administration of the community's lands, housing, infrastructure and community services, and especially its relationships with government agencies and outside resource developers. This work is usually done at meetings called by local or regional community organisations, such as health services, community councils and land councils.

The point to note is that the kind of work that is done, and needs doing, is intimately related to the efforts of communities to deal with the problems caused by dispossession and the destruction of their traditional economies and societies (and, in more recent years, the collapse of the accommodation their own societies and economies made with rural industries). If people simply try to 'insert' themselves as employees or workers, or as self-employed small business people into the dominant economy, this does not solve these underlying problems, because the maintenance of indigenous lives and cultures is about more than just 'work' and money. Obligations to family, kin and country, to the maintenance of Aboriginal law and custom, to cultural survival as distinct peoples take precedence. There is considerable evidence that when people have the choice, a good number choose to study and work in ways which makes it possible for them to be active agents in maintaining

and reproducing the life and culture that makes them distinct peoples. This is partly what is behind statistics on:

> *. . . the substantial occupational segregation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (and) . . . the over concentration in a few industries, mostly in the government and community services sector.* (Taylor & Liu Jin 1996)

or what Smith and Roach (1966, p.73) called a 'duality in the labour market'. This has been a continued theme in CAEPR research since 1991, the 'likely existence of an Aboriginal labour market which operates separately from the rest of the labour market' (Taylor 1992, p.1).

From within this perspective it also becomes clear that community-based indigenous organisations, of which there are several thousand at least, are *primary development agencies* who, between them, organise and co-ordinate both the paid and unpaid work of many thousands of indigenous people, and non-indigenous people who work with them, in pursuit of the specific local development objectives of the communities from which they spring. In the health industry there is now, through the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS), a somewhat belated recognition of the importance of the community-controlled health services in providing leadership in the provision of primary health care. Similar recognition still awaits land councils, legal services, resource agencies, children's services, community councils, community-controlled schools and adult education providers and so on who, taken together, are the main force in promoting improved living standards for their people. While this was recognised by the RCIADIC, and while the importance of indigenous organisations has been recognised academically since the pioneering work of Charles Rowley and the Social Sciences Research Council in the 1960s and 1970s, there is still no serious study being done of these organisations by the VET research sector, nor have their views and perspectives been adequately included in VET policy and planning.

The research literature to which VET researchers and policy-makers might turn for an understanding of indigenous organisations and their contribution to overcoming disadvantage includes the local and regional studies already referred to, as well as some international work such as that collected by Blunt and Warren (1996). Beyond that, partly because indigenous organisations have been wary of making themselves the subject of non-indigenous research agendas, there is not a great deal apart from the organisations' own annual reports and other publications. In addition, there is one national study carried

out by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) under contract to the Commonwealth, a two-volume report by Dr Jim Fingleton produced for ATSIC as a review of the Councils and Associations Act, which included 32 detailed case studies of indigenous organisations (Fingleton 1996). Health services have been the subject of some attention in various health inquiries, and the review of the AEDP examined the evidence of the contribution community organisations made to Aboriginal employment growth. This is clearly an area which would repay more detailed research, but this will only happen if researchers are prepared to negotiate appropriate protocol with the organisations concerned to ensure they retain some control over the research process and the data collected.

The final level to which this analysis brings us is the newly expanding area of regional agreements and regional governance. In the wake of the High Court's Mabo decision, there has been considerable interest by indigenous organisations in the incorporation of alternative models of development into regional agreements negotiated under the Native Title Act. The National Indigenous Working Group on Native Title concluded that regional agreements provide a comprehensive means of resolving co-existence issues, and future indigenous and non-indigenous land use, without extinguishing native title and can facilitate social and economic development. Work on regional agreements, which can specify clear development goals as well as education and training strategies to support them (Sullivan 1997) overlaps with ATSIC regional planning processes, but also with alternative models of indigenous regional government as have been canvassed most recently in relation to the Torres Strait Islands. A future challenge for the VET sector, particularly its research arm, is to prove itself capable of doing the local and regional work which will allow it to contribute usefully to these debates and developments.

Findings and directions for future research

THIS CRITICAL REVIEW of the VET research and policy development literature suggests that the problem is not so much participation, per se, (or the lack of it) by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in vocational education and training, but rather the lack of opportunities for *appropriate* participation. This has not been addressed in the research literature which exhibits a number of serious shortcomings:

- In the rush to define Aboriginal peoples as 'disadvantaged', there has been little critical scrutiny of the assumptions behind such terminology, and as a result there has been insufficient attention paid either to the diversity of indigenous peoples' reality, or to its 'locational specificity'; nor to the actual paid and unpaid work which people are already doing in their own communities and its importance.
- There is also little historical analysis of the development processes which have produced the current appalling state of Aboriginal unemployment and poverty, especially the restructuring of rural economies.
- An assumption is being made that it is up to Aboriginal peoples to fit themselves into the restructured economy of the 1990s, through acquiring more vocational education and training, but little attention is paid to the fact that this, in most cases, would require people to move off their own country in even greater numbers than they have already been forced to do. This is a move which goes contrary to all the evidence about what people's actual aspirations are, and about what might be most likely to produce improvements in indigenous health and well being.
- This assumption that developments in 'private industry' will lead the way in overcoming indigenous disadvantage is mirrored by a lack of attention to, or understanding of, the key role that indigenous organisations have played and are continuing to play in promoting alternative education, training and development pathways for their communities, nor to the international literature which corroborates the importance of such organisations in any sustainable development strategy for indigenous peoples.

- Despite some dissenting voices, particularly from the independent Aboriginal community-controlled VET sector, there has been almost no attention paid to developments in recent years of mechanisms for regional planning and decision-making by Aboriginal people themselves, or to the ways that VET provision could be improved if VET planning was more integrated with these regional indigenous processes.
- There has been little heed taken of the many criticisms made of 'mainstreaming' as 'assimilationism', nor any detailed research done, for example, of the political economy of VET resource allocation, which might help to explain the persistence of a model of VET provision which at least on the face of it appears to run directly contrary to the interests of the majority of indigenous communities.

This analysis suggests some clear directions for future research to rectify these problems, most of which have been alluded to in the body of the paper. There is clearly a need to disaggregate the national and State data on which most strategies and policy directions are based, and pay much closer attention to the historically specific conditions in particular localities and regions. Urgent review and evaluation is needed of current strategies based on centralised national goals and top-down industry-driven programs. The specific area of CDEP and the part it can play in providing pathways into employment and further education and training needs closer study. The growing interest in regional agreements provides scope for alternative models of service provision. Most importantly, there is a need for local and regional studies carried out in partnership with indigenous community-controlled organisations to identify alternative pathways into education, training and employment which are consistent with the communities' own development aspirations, which are expressed and articulated in the clearest and most accountable way by these organisations.

A significant conclusion of the Hughes report, reached at the end of the first major national investigation of indigenous education needs, was that:

> *. . . the most challenging issue of all is to ensure education is available to all Aboriginal people in a manner that reinforces rather than suppresses their unique cultural identity. The imposition on Aboriginal people of an education system developed to meet the needs of the majority cultural group does not achieve this.* (AEP Task Force 1988, p.2)

The evidence presented in this current review confirms this in relation to the vocational education and training sector. It is clear that the disadvantage that Aboriginal people experience in the labour market and the economy can never be overcome simply by attempting to duplicate the urban-based mainstream Australian economic and social structure in Aboriginal communities. Indigenous peoples therefore need a different set of education and training pathways, which may well include 'mainstream' options, but whose fundamental characteristics are their close fit with locally and regionally determined indigenous development needs.

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Appendix: Background to this project and methodology

In mid 1997, the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP), a national Aboriginal organisation formed to represent the rights, interests and needs of community-controlled Aboriginal adult education, initiated discussions with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) regarding its research agenda. Following several meetings between the FIAEP directors and NCVER management, it was agreed that FIAEP would undertake a review for NCVER of some recent research into indigenous peoples' *development needs and aspirations*, a concept which encompasses the full range of issues and programs sometimes also called 'indigenous affairs'.

After initial discussions between NCVER's director and FIAEP board members, the research review was undertaken by FIAEP's project staff at that time, Bob Boughton and Deborah Durnan. A draft report was produced and distributed to the FIAEP directors, all senior Aboriginal managers in the FIAEP's member organisations. FIAEP currently has nine members, all Aboriginal community-controlled organisations involved in the provision of adult education and training to their communities. The Board of Directors consists of the directors of FIAEP's five founding organisations, Tranby College, Tauondi College, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, the Aboriginal Dance Theatre and the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association. The additions and amendments they suggested have been incorporated into this final paper.

This final draft was written by Bob Boughton, who by then was employed as a Research Fellow with the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Indigenous and Tropical Health, Menzies School of Health Research, Alice Springs.

The FIAEP gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the CRC in making time available to Bob to assist with the completion of the project, and to the staff of NCVER, in particular Chris Robinson and Hugh Guthrie, for the advice and support they have provided.

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This review of research on vocational education and training is one of a series of reports commissioned to guide the development of future national research and evaluation priorities.

Bob Boughton is a research fellow with the Co-operative Research Centre for Indigenous and Tropical Health at the Menzies School of Health Research, Alice Springs. He carried out the research for this paper in collaboration with the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers Ltd.